United Nations E/1998/56

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
26 May 1998

Original: English

Substantive session of 1998
New York, 6-31 July 1998
Item 6 of the provisional agenda*
Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits

Implementation of the agreed conclusions of the 1997 coordination segment of the Economic and Social Council on freshwater, including clean and safe water supply and sanitation

Report of the Secretary-General

1. The present report reviews progress in the implementation of agreed conclusions 1997/3 of the 1997 coordination segment of the Economic and Social Council on freshwater, including clean and safe water supply and sanitation,[1] adopted by the Council at its substantive session of 1997, with respect to the streamlining of programmes and activities of the organizations of the United Nations system, and capacity-building, information management and water quality issues, as considered in those agreed conclusions.

2. In agreed conclusion 1997/3, having taken note of existing arrangements for cooperation and coordination through the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Water Resources and other arrangements among specific organizations, the Council recommended that organizations of the United Nations system take further steps towards streamlining their programme and activities. The Council urged the ACC Subcommittee to analyse in detail the activities that were currently being carried out by the organizations of the system and their interrelationship and to prepare a report on the subject by the end of 1997, as a useful input into the preparatory process leading up to the sixth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

3. Pursuant to this recommendation, a report of the Secretary-General entitled "Activities of the organizations of the United Nations system in the field of freshwater resources" (E/CN.17/1998/3) was submitted both to the Expert Group Meeting on Strategic Approaches to Freshwater Management, held at Harare, Zimbabwe, from 27 to 30 January 1998, and to the Commission on Sustainable Development at its sixth session.

4. At its sixth session, held from 20 April to 1 May 1998, the Commission invited the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources, as task manager for chapter 18 of Agenda 21,[2] to accelerate the implementation of chapter 18 by considering action to, *inter alia*: (a) identify gaps or inconsistencies in the implementation of programmes of its constituent organizations, by assessing the main features and

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effectiveness of the implementation of those activities, and ensure that the mainstreaming of gender perspectives was appropriately included, (b) consider ways of increasing efficiency in programme delivery and possibilities for joint programming and (c) explore the potential of cooperation arrangements and, where appropriate, taking into account the experience gained in existing programmes in the United Nations system.[3] The Commission also invited the Secretary-General to provide a report to the Commission prior to its eighth session on progress by the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources in the above-mentioned activities.[4]

5. Note has been taken of the Council's recommendation concerning the enhanced participation of regional commissions at the sessions of the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources. In this regard, it should be mentioned that representatives of both the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) attended the eighteenth session of the Subcommittee, held at International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) headquarters in Vienna, Austria, in October 1997. The nineteenth session of the Subcommittee will be held at the headquarters of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in Beirut, Lebanon, in October of this year. The chief of the Water Branch of ESCAP was elected Vice-Chairperson of the Subcommittee for the nineteenth and twentieth sessions. Unfortunately, the paucity of financial resources remains a constraint on the effective participation of the commissions.

6. With regard to capacity-building, in addition to their ongoing activities, the organizations of the system, at the eighteenth session of the Subcommittee, discussed a draft system-wide strategy for human resources development in the water sector, with particular focus on the areas of formative years, vocational training and ongoing continuous training, which was presented by the representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (see ACC/1997/18, para. 34). Major recommendations of the proposed strategy would include (a) systematic cataloguing of human resources needs, (b) prioritizing target audiences, (c) supplying schools with adequate materials, (d) special consideration for children not in schools, (e) increasing the focus on water scarcity and transboundary issues in outreach, (f) ensuring that water assessments included human resources needs, (g) special focus on gender issues and (h) distance learning to be further developed through the Internet. The members of the Subcommittee considered this initiative to be very useful as an entry point for United Nations organizations interested in the area of capacity-building and as a tool for strengthening cooperation among Subcommittee members. The Subcommittee agreed that this proposal would be further developed by UNDP and circulated for comments. A new version of the proposal containing more specific recommendations and actual strategies is expected to be adopted at the next session of the Subcommittee and to offer a basis for the formulation of system-wide guidelines in this area.

7. The Commission on Sustainable Development, at its sixth session, called upon the international community, in particular the organizations of the United Nations system, especially UNDP, to strengthen capacity-building programmes, taking into account the special needs of developing countries, in particular the least developed countries and the specific circumstances of small island developing States, in areas such as training, institutional development and the participation of women, youth, indigenous people, and local communities in support of national efforts in this field.[5]

8. With regard to information management, the ACC Subcommittee is currently involved in two major efforts. At its eighteenth session, the Subcommittee decided that the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, with the assistance of the United Nations University (UNU), would establish a specific World Wide Web page on water-related information within the new United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat home page. This page will provide basic information on available databases within the United Nations system, and include links to the various organizations responsible for each database. The Subcommittee also agreed that UNU, through its International Network on Water, Environment and Health, would take the lead in coordinating the development of user-friendly linkages between Web sites and the strengthening of Internet access among member agencies.

9. More recently, the Commission on Sustainable Development, at its sixth session, called upon the international community, including the United Nations system, to support national efforts in information and data collection and dissemination through coordinated and differentiated action. The Commission recommended that United Nations agencies and programmes and other international bodies should, in their respective fields, support Governments in the development and coordination of relevant data and information networks at the appropriate level, carry out periodic global assessments and analyses of water resources availability (both quality and quantity) and changes in demand, to assist in identifying water-related problems and environmental issues, and promote the

broadest exchange and dissemination of relevant information, in particular to developing countries.[6]

10. The ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources, at its eighteenth session, also discussed in detail a proposal for a comprehensive global water quality initiative, an area in which the problem of non-existent or unreliable data is particularly acute. The proposal for the development of a comprehensive water quality programme based on a carefully selected global network of representative drainage basins that encompassed the broad spectrum of environments – so that future extrapolation to unmonitored basins could be achieved – was developed as a cooperative effort of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNU, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the World Health Organization (WHO). It was presented to the Subcommittee by the President of the International Commission on Water Quality of the International Association of Hydrological Sciences, on behalf of a group of experts convened by UNESCO.

11. The Subcommittee agreed that a revised version of this initiative would be prepared by WHO as the lead agency, on behalf of the Global Environment Monitoring System (GEMS)/Water Programme, which is co-sponsored by WHO, UNEP, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and UNESCO. The initiative aims at (a) addressing quantity and quality concerns through an integrated approach, (b) linking land-use management and sustainable water management, (c) recognizing freshwater, coastal and marine environments as a management continuum, (d) recognizing water as an economic and social good and promoting cost-effective interventions, (e) supporting innovative and participatory approaches and (f) focusing on actions to improve the lives of people and the quality of their environment. Further discussions concerning the proposed initiative and modalities for its implementation will take place at the nineteenth session of the Subcommittee.

12. With regard to the Council's recommendation concerning the need to pay close attention to the issues of arsenic contamination and contamination from persistent organic pollutants (POPs), WHO is currently completing a revised health risk assessment of arsenic. This will be published in the environmental health criteria series of the International Programme on Chemical Safety. WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) both provide expert advice and verification of field testing equipment for arsenic monitoring in wells in several developing countries, such as Bangladesh and India. In addition, the water quality monitoring programme of the above-mentioned GEMS/Water Programme has established a global register of rivers flowing into the oceans so as to provide pollutant fluxes for more than 400 rivers worldwide, including POPs. Within the GEMS/Water Programme, a region-by-region survey of levels of POPs in surface waters and groundwaters is under way. A first report on the situation in the Asia/Pacific region has already been published by a Canadian water agency, on behalf of GEMS/Water .

13. The Commission on Sustainable Development, at its sixth session, echoed the Council's view concerning the need for a periodic update of a comprehensive assessment of the freshwater resources of the world and invited the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources, as task manager for chapter 18 of Agenda 21, to arrange for the compilation and publication of such assessments.[7] The members of the Subcommittee will discuss modalities for the preparation of an updated assessment for consideration by the Commission in the context of the next comprehensive review of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21.

14. Concern over the need to strengthen the coordination of the activities of the organizations of the United Nations system dealing with water resources at the country level and over the need to streamline programmes and activities was emphasized in the report of the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources on its eighteenth session (ACC/1997/18, para. 15). While the Subcommittee acknowledged that the coordination of country-level activities rested primarily with the United Nations resident coordinator, it was felt that organizations of the system that were active in the field would be in a strong position to support the resident coordinator on system-wide efforts to improve coordination of and collaboration on water resources activities at the country level. The Subcommittee thus recommended that a water resources working group, led by the resident coordinator representative, be set up at the country level to improve the coordination of water resources activities of the United Nations system. Following a Subcommittee request, the resident coordinators in each country are being informed about this recommendation and about the willingness of members organizations of the Subcommittee to provide support for this task, as required, through the expertise that they may have available *in situ*.

Notes

[1] See document A/52/3, chap. IV, para. 7.

[2] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

[3] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1998, Supplement No. 9* (E/1998/29), chap. I, sect. B, decision 6/1, para. 50.

[4] Ibid., para. 51.

[5] Ibid., para. 30.

[6] Ibid., para. 23.

[7] Ibid., para. 56.